



North Fork Holston River 2006

From its origin in the southeast corner of Bland County, the North Fork of the Holston River flows more than 100 miles through Southwest Virginia before crossing the Tennessee State line near the community of Yuma. The river boasts an outstanding smallmouth bass population, and supports populations of many other fish species. Fish population abundance and size structure has been stable in recent years.

Biologists collected about 70 smallmouth bass per hour of electrofishing in 2003 and 2005. This catch rate is about average compared to other smallmouth bass rivers in Virginia. Rivers like the James, New and Shenandoah have slightly higher catch rates that range from 70 to 80 fish per hour of sampling. However, the North Fork Holston River compares very well to other rivers in numbers of smallmouth bass between 14 and 18 inches long. About one third of the smallmouth sampled measured more than 14 inches total length, and more than 10 percent were longer than 17 inches. The proportion of 14 and 17-inch smallmouths in the North Fork is higher than in the James, New and Shenandoah Rivers.

North Fork Holston smallmouths grow slowly, but enjoy a very high annual survival rate (79 percent). The high survival rate allows slow growing fish an opportunity to reach older ages and greater lengths. Smallmouths from one to seventeen years old were collected in 2003. One of the 17-year-old fish was 17 inches long and the other measured 20 inches long. If you would like to know how old a smallmouth from the North Fork Holston is, you can estimate its age using Figure 1.

Rock bass size and numbers were very good in the 2003 and 2005 samples. Channel and flathead catfish are occasionally collected, but not in big numbers. Some really nice redbreast sunfish were collected in 2005. Various species of redhorse suckers, northern hog suckers, common carp and minnows were also collected.

There is a fish consumption prohibition in effect from Saltville downstream to the Tennessee state line due to mercury contamination.

A 20-inch minimum size limit is in effect for smallmouth bass in the North Fork Holston River from the Route 91 Bridge upstream of Saltville downstream to the Tennessee State line. All smallmouth bass less than 20 inches must be released. Only one smallmouth larger than 20 inches may be kept per angler per day. This regulation should protect and enhance the trophy smallmouth fishery that has developed in this river.

Two new boat ramps have been constructed near the town of Saltville. One ramp

is located within the town limits, and one is located downstream of Saltville on Rt. 611.

How old is this smallmouth?

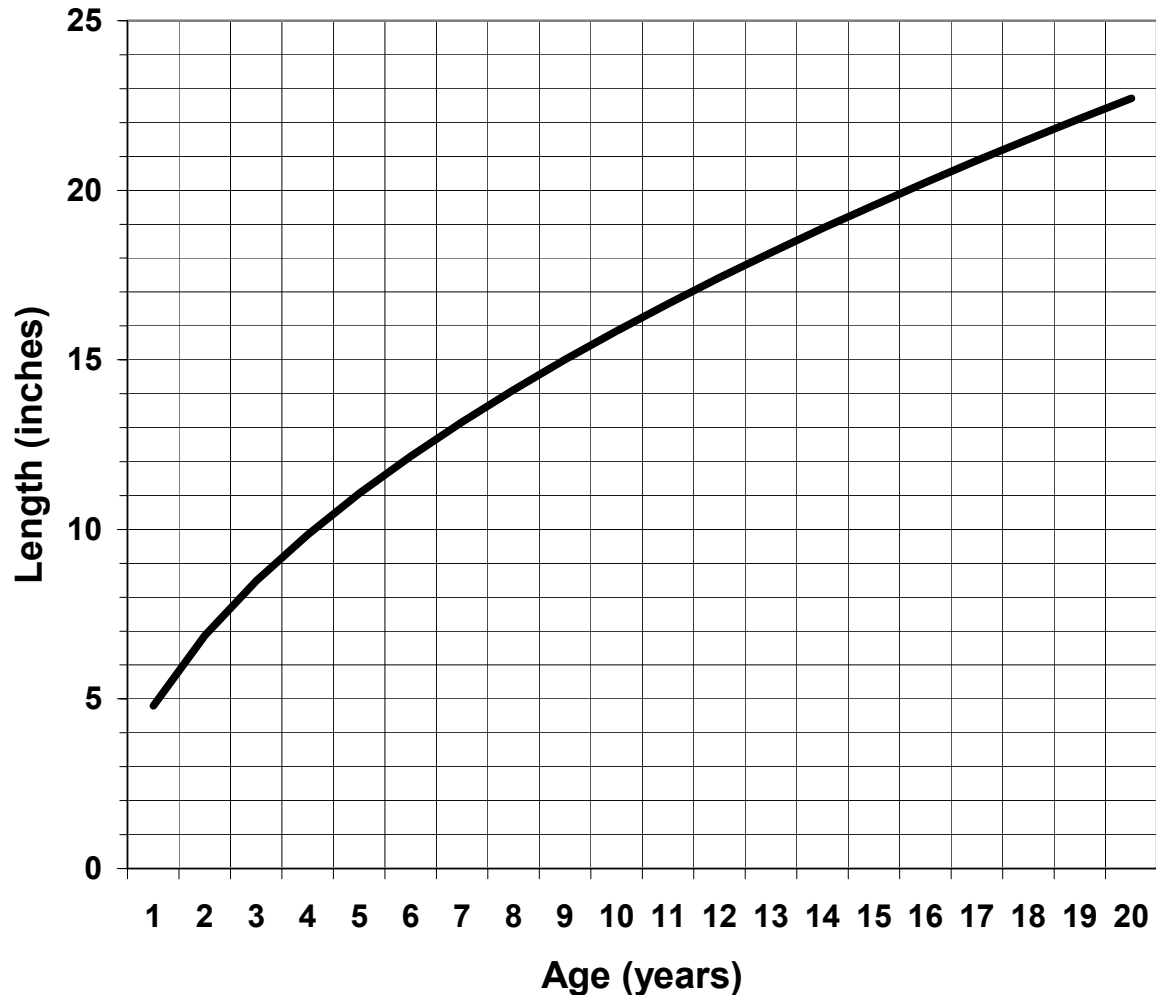


Figure 2. Use this chart to estimate the age of a smallmouth you catch in the North Fork Holston River. Find the length of your fish in inches on the vertical axis, and then follow the horizontal grid line across until it intersects with the curve. Then follow the vertical grid line down to estimate the age of your fish.

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